

April 2, 2008

## Mines must be restored to natural state

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Let me just say from the outset that I am not in favor of rock mining in Lee County's environmentally sensitive water replenishment zones. In fact, I'm fundamentally opposed.

Then again, I'm not an expert in geology, hydrology, ecology or any of the other sciences that should determine whether proposed mining in 83,000 acres of protected land would be environmentally defensible. That said, I don't think scientists are going to be the decision makers in this deal.

To mine or not to mine ultimately will be decided by high-powered lobbyists and politicians in Tallahassee (much to the dismay of the Lee County Commission). So I don't feel like I've exactly thrown in the towel when I hope that any mines we end up with are "good mines," as opposed to environmental wastelands.

I have studied phosphate mining enough to know that mining in Florida seriously disrupts surface aquifers - the underground rivers of water that feed our rivers and estuaries, and ultimately provide us with much of the water we drink. As a result, the Peace River has been robbed of much of its drainage, and as many as seven species of fish have disappeared from habitats including flowing springs that have dried up completely. And we doubtlessly have fewer shrimp, crabs, snook and grouper as a result.

Rock mines are not phosphate mines, but they are proposed for areas in the drainage basin for Estero Bay, which already has been significantly degraded. We've got to be careful.

But we could end up with some really good freshwater fishing and birding areas if the miners are made to restore the lands to a natural condition, after they've removed the rock, which we admittedly need for roads for our inexorably expanding population.

An example of a fine mine is the Interstate 75 borrow pit in Charlotte County that now is Webb Lake. Rather than a box-cut hole that favors only exotic species, biologists with the then-Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission designed a lake with winding channels and broad flats that mimic the environment in which Florida's native bass, bluegill, shellcracker and channel cats thrive.

That's because, rather than steep sides totally unsuited for spawning by our native sunfishes, they created shallows where plant communities, including bulrush, spikerush and peppergrass, grow, and bream and bass can fan their sparkling beds.

Judging by the rock mines I've seen, that's not what the mining companies have in mind. I'm sure that would require extra expense, but it's better than not mining at all. Just ask the phosphate companies.

They're now experts in what they call reclamation. That's an overstatement; it's really mitigation. But it's better to have that than to have a pit filled with algae and tilapia.

So if the battle against mines looks lost, guarantees for reclamation wouldn't be a bad thing for

which to fight. That should be Plan B, but it definitely ought to be a part of the plan.

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